

# ECNL Need to Know:

## Council of Europe Guidelines

### for civil participation in political decision-making



On 27 September 2017 Council of Europe's 47 member states agreed upon comprehensive guidelines that include both overarching principles and practical suggestions on how to broaden opportunities for civil participation in decision-making processes.

[Click here to see them.](#)

#### Why are the guidelines important?

- They recognise that the right to civil participation in political decision-making should be secured to *individuals, NGOs and civil society* at large.
- They emphasise that effective and meaningful participation can only be achieved if member states guarantee - through law and practice - the *effective rights of freedom of association, of assembly, of expression and of information*.
- They emphasise that *participation in decision-making is distinct* from political and lobbying activities.
- They state that effective civil participation is not possible without an *environment that enables and encourages it*. Such an environment must include legal and practical guarantees for fundamental rights and rule of law as a precondition for civil participation.
- They highlight *civil society's role as central in a pluralist democracy*, and note that government "recognition and protection" of civil society's advocacy and monitoring functions is essential for "building a diverse and vibrant society."

#### What are the main types of civil participation outlined in the guidelines?

- **Provision of information:** At all stages of decision making, all appropriate information should be presented in clear and easily understandable language and in accessible format, without undue administrative obstacles and, in principle, free of charge, in accordance with open data principles.
- **Consultation:** Views on a specific policy or topic should be collected as part of an official procedure, through various means and tools, such as meetings, public hearings, focus groups, surveys, questionnaires and digital tools. Authorities should provide publicly available feedback on the outcome of consultations.
- **Dialogue:** Structured, long-lasting and results-oriented process which is based on mutual interest in the exchange of opinions between public authorities, individuals, NGOs and civil society at large. Different platforms for dialogue include regular public hearings, public forums, and advisory councils.
- **Active involvement:** Civil participation in decision-making processes extends beyond the provision of information, consultation or dialogue. It may include working groups or committees for the co-development of documents, with transparent criteria and processes for the representation of individuals, NGOs and civil society.

#### How can you make use of these guidelines?

- ▶ Assess the implementation of laws and regulations that affect participation and initiate reform to ensure that conditions for participation are guaranteed in the legal framework.
- ▶ Communicate and disseminate information about the content of and opportunities for participation in the guidelines.
- ▶ Ask the authorities to develop user-friendly guides – such as brochures or other tools – both offline and online, train civil servants and adopt measures to support civil participation.
- ▶ Get involved in political decision-making and help facilitate input by broad segments of civil society.

## Principles of Civil Participation

- **Mutual respect** between all actors as the basis for honest interaction and mutual trust
  - **Respect for the independence of NGOs** whether their opinions are consistent with those of the public authorities or not
- **Respect for the position of public authorities** with whom responsibility and accountability for decision making lies
- **Openness, transparency and accountability**
- **Responsiveness**, with all actors providing appropriate feedback
- **Non-discrimination** and inclusiveness so that all voices, including those of the less privileged and most vulnerable, can be heard and taken into account
  - **Gender equality** and equal participation of all groups including those with particular interests and needs, such as young people, the elderly, people with disabilities or minorities
  - **Accessibility** through the use of clear language and appropriate means of participation, offline or online